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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 004176

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CASTANO'S FATE UNKNOWN

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, reasons

1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) Carlos Castano's fate remains unclear after an April 16 armed confrontation between Castano's personnel and unidentified individuals in Antioquia Department. The most often heard scenario is that Castano's brother and fellow paramilitary commander Vicente Castano was behind the attack in an attempt to remove Castano from negotiations with the government and prevent him from turning himself into authorities. Most accounts suggest that Castano survived the attack but was taken by Vicente's men. It is also possible, however, that he is dead or escaped. The GOC views Castano's removal from the negotiations as a major setback because it has enabled hardline paramilitaries to take over talks. End Summary.

Divergent Accounts

12. (C) On April 16, an armed confrontation occurred between United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) commander Carlos Castano, his bodyguards, and unidentified armed individuals at a ranch regularly used by Castano in northern Antioquia Department. At least two men were wounded, including Castano's bodyguard Jairo Vladimir Rojas, aka "La Vaca," who is receiving medical treatment in Bogota. Castano's whereabouts are unknown. Castano's wife Kenia Gomez and baby survived the attack and are presently under GOC protection. She claims to have no knowledge of Castano's status.

13. (C) Vice President Francisco Santos, Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, and other reports indicate that Castano's brother, AUC commander Vicente Castano was the intellectual author of the attack, possibly with the assistance of AUC military chief Salvatore Mancuso and "narco-para" Diego Murillo, aka "Don Berna." They were attempting to keep Castano from influencing negotiations and from providing evidence about their drug trafficking activities to authorities. Castano, who indicated he would be willing to spend time in prison, turn himself in to the U.S., and demobilize his troops, had been increasingly marginalized within the AUC. He did not attend the April 15 talks between Restrepo and the Central Bolivar Bloc (BCB) and AUC. According to Restrepo, Castano had lost his military power over the AUC but remained a symbolically important figure and a relatively cooperative negotiator.

14. (C) On April 21, Mancuso and Vicente Castano denied responsibility for the attack to Restrepo. They claimed their men were in the area in Antioquia where Castano regularly visited when they heard gunshots. According to Mancuso and Vicente Castano, their men radioed Carlos Castano's personnel, who told them there was no problem. The Mancuso/Vicente men then left the area. Upon learning from the media that Castano had been attacked, Mancuso and Vicente sent their men back to the site where they found evidence of a firefight and noticed Castano's vehicle was gone. Mancuso also has publicly denied involvement and suggested that Castano may have faked the attack.

Is He Dead or Alive?

15. (C) VP Santos, who appears to have access to reliable sources, and several press accounts indicate that Castano survived the attack and was taken by Vicente Castano's personnel. One of the wounded bodyguards publicly claimed he overheard the attackers saying that they had Castano. Nevertheless, it is also possible that Castano escaped and is under protection from sympathetic paramilitaries. Castano used to exert a great deal of influence over the AUC and had many loyal proteges. The other distinct possibility is, of course, that Castano is dead.

Uribe Moving Cautiously

16. (C) The GOC has demanded that the paramilitaries reveal

what happened to Castano. President Uribe and Restrepo have decided to base their next steps on the results of a soon-to-begin investigation by the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia). Mancuso and Vicente have agreed that the Fiscalia should conduct an investigation at the confrontation site and interview key witnesses. Restrepo noted to us that Mancuso and Vicente claim there are witnesses available, but Castano's personnel claim all the witnesses have disappeared.

Comment

17. (C) Restrepo views Castano's removal from negotiations as a major setback. In his absence, the paramilitaries have hardened their negotiating position and rejected the possibility of spending any time in prison. Hardliner and BCB policital chief Ivan Dugue, aka "Ernesto Baez" and militarily strong narcotraffickers such as Murillo, BCB military chief Javier Montanez, aka "Macaco" and AUC Centauros Bloc Miguel Arroyave, dominate talks.
WOOD